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FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8573  
INFO RUEHDS/AMEMBASSY ADDIS ABABA 6028  
RUEHDJ/AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI 2907  
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY KAMPALA 1044  
RUEHKH/AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM 0193  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1263  
RUEHNR/AMEMBASSY NAIROBI 4677  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 1442  
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 001015

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/30/2016

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SUBJECT: SAMARITAN'S PURSE,S DRIVERS ARRESTED AND VEHICLES  
IMPOUNDED

REF: ASMARA 958

Classified By: AMB. Scott H. DeLisi for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (U) Summary. On November 20, Samaritan's Purse (SP) attempted to transfer eight vehicles, including two trucks, to the Beja Relief Organization (BRO) in Telkuk in Eastern Sudan. During the transport, the police forced the drivers to return to Asmara. In Asmara, the drivers and the local supervisor of the car rental agency were arrested. SP is trying to work the issue quietly and has requested the Embassy not provide any assistance at this time. End Summary.

12. (C) On November 20, nine drivers for Samaritan's Purse, five employed directly by SP and four hired through a local car rental agency, left Asmara and arrived in Keren at 1930. They had planned to overnight in Keren and leave early the next morning to drive to Telkuk. Around 2300, the acting SP Country Director was called by one of the drivers who told him that the police had come to the hotel and told them to turn over the vehicles. The drivers refused, spent the night in Keren and after a series of phone calls between the MLHW and the police in Keren the next morning, the drivers and the vehicles were provided a police escort to return to Asmara. In Asmara, the GSE impounded the vehicles and arrested the nine drivers along with the local supervisor of the car rental agency. To date, no official charges against the drivers have been filed. (Comment: The GSE rarely informs individuals of charges or reasons for detention. End Comment.)

13. (C) Acting SP Country Director told poloff on November 27 that the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare (MLHW) had given oral approval to transfer program equipment to BRO. Despite the oral approval, SP had nothing in writing and had initiated the transfer without obtaining the GSE travel

permits usually required by NGOs for travel outside of Asmara. Based on SP's past history with the GSE, the acting Country Director said he felt they "had the green light" to go forward with the transfer of vehicles. They had been told by BRO that everything was in order in Sudan and felt they had the consent of the MOD. SP, who has operated under what they have termed a "special relationship with the Ministry of Defense(MOD)," had followed their previous procedures of notifying the MOD of their plans to travel and proceeded without official permits from the GSE. (Note: Over the past four years, SP has been running cross-border operations to Eastern Sudan with few problems based largely on oral agreements coordinated directly with the regional MOD commander, General Tekle, and outside of the general MLHW procedures required by the GSE for NGOs. While other NGOs have encountered difficulties with travel permits, SP had been permitted to travel through Eritrea to Eastern Sudan without them. End Note.)

¶4. (C) Presently, SP is providing support for the families of the detained individuals and attempting to resolve the situation on their own. At this time, SP has not asked for any assistance from the Embassy. In fact, the acting Country Director specifically said to poloff, "the reason I didn't let you know earlier was because we don't want the situation to become politicized."

¶5. (C) The acting Country Director mentioned that General Tekle had told him in a conversation several weeks earlier that SP should give the equipment directly to him and he would arrange the transfer, because the Beja were not "smart enough" to know what to do with the vehicles. Despite these statements, SP does not believe this incident was an attempt by the GSE, or more specifically the MOD, to obtain the

vehicles since they could have been seized at any time. SP suspects that a local Eritrean SP staff may have tipped off the police or the GSE security personnel about the transport and the absence of travel permits in an attempt to build credibility with the GSE. SP's acting Country Director believes he can resolve the transfer and detention issues on his own.

¶6. (C) Comment. The Embassy will remain engaged with Samaritan's Purse and offer what support it can. As noted reftel, the Ambassador had raised the issue of SP assets earlier with the Minister of Labor and Social Welfare who said her ministry had no problem with the transfer. We suspect that tension over areas of responsibilities between General Tekle and the MLHW, or even General Tekle's own agenda, contributed to this incident and that it was not the result of the on-going issues between the GSE and NGOs. End comment.  
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